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ABSTRACT

The communication processes involved in parent/teacher or parent/teacher/student conferences are addressed in this booklet. Noting that teachers handle most conferences without difficulty, the booklet concentrates on "problem situations," such as when parents and teachers disagree, when misunderstandings occur, or when a student is not performing well. The six sections of the booklet discuss the theory of the various elements that make for effective conferences. Each section contains suggestions for pertinent activities to help teachers translate theory into practice. The sections follow roughly a chronological order, beginning with an outline of the preconference preparatory phase, proceeding to analyses of the initial interaction and the problem-solving process, continuing with a discussion of possible conflicts during conferences, and concluding with suggestions for alternative formats and postconference follow-up. (FL)

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Communicating in Conferences

Parent-Teacher-Student Interaction

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Foreword

The Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) is a national information system developed by the U.S. Office of Education and now sponsored by the National Institute of Education (NIE). It provides ready access to descriptions of exemplary programs, research and development efforts, and related information useful in developing more effective educational programs.

Through its network of specialized centers or clearinghouses, each of which is responsible for a particular educational area, ERIC acquires, evaluates, abstracts, and indexes current significant information and lists this information in its reference publications.

ERIC/RCS, the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, disseminates educational information related to research, instruction, and personnel preparation at all levels and in all institutions. The scope of interest of the Clearinghouse includes relevant research reports, literature reviews, curriculum guides and descriptions, conference papers, project or program reviews, and other print materials related to all aspects of reading, English, educational journalism, and speech communication.

The ERIC system has already made available—through the ERIC Document Reproduction System—much informative data. However, if the findings of specific educational research are to be intelligble to teachers and applicable to teaching, considerable bodies of data must be reevaluated, focused, translated, and molded into an essentially different context. Rather than resting at the point of making research reports readily accessible, NIE has directed the separate clearinghouses to work with professional organizations in developing information analysis papers in specific areas within the scope of the clearinghouses.

ERIC/RCS is pleased to cooperate with the Speech Communication Association in making available this book, *Communicating in Conferences: Parent-Teacher-Student Interaction.*

Bernard O'Donnell
Director, ERIC/RCS

Introduction

The lives of parents, teachers, and students are inextricably intertwined. Yet, they form a troubled alliance. As agrarian America was transformed over the past 100 years into a modern urban society, and large consolidated schools staffed by professional educators with specialized credentials replaced intimate one-room-one-teacher schoolhouses, these natural partners grew further and further apart.

In the last two decades, however, the trend has shifted. School/home interaction and cooperation are on the rise again. The civil rights struggle, the women's movement, consumer advocacy, Public Law 94-142, and other forces in contemporary society have increased parents' and educators' contact, accountability, and confrontation vis-à-vis each other. The national PTA is encouraging widespread adoption of classroom instructional units on all aspects of parental responsibility; the Reverend Jesse Jackson's PUSH for Excellence program urges parents to visit schools, read to their children, and help the schools fight violence, drug addiction, and truancy; and legislation mandates that parents participate in developing Individualized Educational Plans for their exceptional children. As part of this movement, the quality of interaction between parents, teachers, and students is being given even greater attention (Cronin, 1977).

Our concern, the face-to-face conference, is a potentially vital vehicle for communicating among these various parties. When we compare the meaningfulness of the few dozen abstract, written symbols on the traditional quarterly report card to one twenty-minute conference, with an interchange that includes 3,000-plus words and innumerable nonverbal signals, the value of conferences becomes self-evident. The deeply interdependent, critically significant parent-teacher-student collaboration should be carried out by people who have an open, honest, mutually respectful partnership. This book addresses the communication processes involved in this effort.

It can be helpful for teachers to recognize their own biases about conferences by taking themselves as the starting point in the process and reviewing their personal experiences, beginning with their own student "days," their experiences in conferences as parents, and their experience as teachers. (The review might also include conversations with other parents, teachers, and students about their experiences.) Many of these recollections will evoke either positive or negative feelings about the experience. When a positive memory arises, it is worthwhile to identify what the teacher did in the situation that was helpful and constructive. For negative recollections, it is equally valuable to identify what the teacher did that was harmful or destructive. This sort of reflection can make explicit one's own implicit rules for conference interaction; these can be compared with the guidelines suggested throughout this text and can be reconsidered in anticipation of future conferences.

The basic conference discussed in most of the text is the one-to-one meeting of a parent and a teacher. (The term parent, as used throughout, may also refer to another adult with whom the teacher meets, such as a grandparent, foster parent, or other person acting as guardian.) However, the basic conference is only one traditional form of interaction between school and home. All too often contact among parents, teachers, and students occurs in only a few ritualized ways. The PTA meeting, Open School Night, and the post-report-card conference are only a small fraction of the many worthwhile options for achieving this collaboration. The material in this book potentially is applicable to all of them.

The following list of practices that are actually in place in various school districts shows the diversity of available formats. It is arranged in terms of the variables implicit in any school/home interaction.

Who is involved?

The teacher meets with one parent.

The teacher meets with both parents.

The teacher meets with parent(s) and the student.

The teacher meets with parent(s), the student, and siblings, grandparents, or whoever else resides in the home and is concerned with the student's performance.

The teacher meets with the parent(s) and another educator who has contact with the student, such as the principal, the school psychologist or guidance counselor, the reading

teacher, the speech therapist, the lunchroom aide (at such a meeting the student may or may not be present).

The teacher meets with a small group of parents (or all parents of students in the class).

School personnel meet with the parents of all the students.

What medium or channel might be used for school/home interaction?

A face-to-face conference.

A phone call from the school to the home.

A note home suggesting that the parent call the school.

A letter to the parents, reporting a student's class problem, and acknowledging a student's classroom achievement.

A newsletter to all parents, summarizing recent classroom activities.

A form for parents to fill in, listing what they want to explore in an upcoming conference.

A homework assignment that requires parent involvement in the student's learning.

An invitation to parents to participate in school functions by serving as an aide in the classroom, the main office, the school, the nurse's office, a materials or resource center, the lunchroom, the school yard or playground; a tutor to students who need special attention; an interpreter for non-English-speaking students; or a chaperone on a field trip.

When might school/home contacts occur?

As early as a year before children enter kindergarten, to ensure that they will be appropriately prepared.

At the beginning of a school year, for a basic orientation.

After the first (or each) report card has been issued.

When a special problem occurs for a student.

On a regular basis, such as monthly.

Where might teacher-parent contacts occur?

At the first prekindergarten registration session.

In the student's classroom.

In a conference lounge area.

At the parents' home.

At the teacher's home.

At a school or class picnic or other social event.

What might the contact entail?

A quick comment when parents bring or call for first-year elementary students.

A performance by students of their classroom achievements, such as an arts presentation.

A ritual, ceremony, or celebration—on a holiday, at graduation, and so on.

A demonstration by the teacher of a typical classroom lesson.

A hands-on workshop in which parents experience the students' activities.

A class for parents, on dealing with children or helping them in learning tasks.

An orientation or goal-setting conference at the beginning of the school year.

An information exchange, get-to-know-each-other conference.

A problem-solving conference to collaborate on dealing with one troublesome element in a student's performance.

A follow-up conference to review the success or failure of previously made plans.

Obviously, school/home contacts can take many forms and fulfill many functions. They can serve to inform family members and the teacher concerning what each has done and perceived in the past; they can implement the making of maximally appropriate future plans; and simply, they can build the interpersonal rapport needed for harmonious interaction. To create an overall, optimal school/home interaction plan for the school year, all of the elements listed above can be mixed into the combination that best suits the particular students, school, and community.

At the conference itself, the major problem is coordinating the concerns of all three people involved. A wise teacher begins by eliciting the goals each party has for their time together, listing them, and then setting priorities so that everyone feels that his or her agenda has been considered (McAleer, 1978). Attention

must be given to ensuring that each member has a chance to address every topic being discussed and that conclusions reached actually are agreed to by all. If these precautions are taken into account, the conference is more likely to be productive and satisfying.

Because most teachers will handle the bulk of their conferences without difficulty, the basics of the conference are only briefly covered in this discussion. More attention is given to so-called problem situations, such as when parents and teachers are likely to disagree, when misunderstandings might occur, or when a student is functioning especially poorly. These represent only a small proportion of all conference situations, but they predominate among those that teachers request help in handling.

The six sections of this book discuss the theory of the various elements that make for effective conferences. At the end of each section, there are suggestions for pertinent activities, addressed directly to the teacher, to help translate theory into practice. The sections of this book follow roughly a chronological sequence, beginning with the preconference preparatory phase, proceeding to the initial interaction and the problem-solving process, continuing with a discussion of possible conflict during conferences, and concluding with suggestions for alternative formats and postconference follow-up. Similar communication processes usually occur no matter who the conference participants are, so this discussion can be applied as well to all conference formats.

Communicating in Conferences

1 Conference Preparation

Because conferences occur infrequently, often on days when several must be crowded into a short period of time, and because they must cover a broad, multifaceted process, each conference should be handled as efficiently as possible. Under these circumstances, careful planning is essential. Preparation involves several phases: coordinating arrangements, including students, setting the scene, considering participants' orientations, gathering data, and establishing objectives. Each of these phases will be explored in turn.

Coordinating Arrangements

Conferences take place within the context of a perpetually busy school year and require the attendance of parents who themselves may be fully engaged in meeting home and work responsibilities. The arrangements must be well integrated with the conflicting demands for the time of all involved. Poorly planned and coordinated conferences can alienate participants and cause resentment.

The scheduling of conferences should be made as convenient as possible for parents. This can be done by allowing some evening time in addition to dismissing school during the regularly scheduled periods (or, if allowed by the school district, by using aides to cover classes during extra conference sessions). Coordinating conferences with other teachers for parents who have two or more children in a school can be helpful, as can providing a baby-sitting service for parents who must bring preschoolers with them. Offering to arrange rides for parents who live at a distance from the school can be helpful to those who otherwise would find it impossible to attend.

Secondary schools face an extraordinary challenge in coordinating a well-organized and maximally effective schedule of parent conferences. At one school (Paine, 1978), teachers were asked to list and rank in order of priority names of fifty students whose parents they wished to see. The lists were pared down to twenty-

two for each teacher by eliminating duplication and giving each teacher top priority choices whenever possible. Teachers consulted the students about what times their parents could attend and then sent home a tentative appointment note with each. Teachers developed a conference schedule based on parent responses and sent home a final confirmation of the appointment time, along with a return sheet for parents to indicate any concerns or questions they wished to discuss. For each subject-matter class, students and teachers each completed an information sheet, which then was returned to the teacher who was to conduct the conference. Armed with this material and kept within the carefully arranged schedule, the participants found the conferences to be very satisfying. With 88.6 percent of the students represented in a conference, the impact of effective coordination was evident.

Including Students

Traditionally, when conferences are scheduled routinely, students are excluded from them. Recently, however, several schools have been experimenting with parent-teacher conferences in which students are included as active participants, and it is generally reported that this is a valuable innovation (Hogan, 1975). The appropriateness of this format is evident when we consider the problems such conferences avert and the good they accomplish.

Since students are both the subjects and the "victims" of conference outcomes, they often worry about what is transpiring. When they neither see nor hear what goes on, they react to the conference that they imagine is occurring, or to their parents' report of it—which of course is a one-sided view. Being included eases the students' minds and provides first-hand knowledge of the event. They feel included in a partnership with the adults in their lives, rather than being mere pawns in the game-plan being devised for them. They can sense the caring and the interest that teacher and parents have in their welfare. They can feel important, valued, heard.

In addition, students can provide essential information for making appropriate decisions at the conference. They can help clarify the educational goals that are meaningful to them. They can provide their own perspectives on the problems they face in their day-to-day lives at school and at home. They can identify the conditions that help and hinder their effective completion of school assignments. Education is intended to affect their thoughts,

feelings, and behavior—and they themselves are the ultimate authority on what is going on inside them during this process (Friedman, 1980).

These arguments for including students in conferences do not apply universally. There are times when their presence is not appropriate, and there are some dangers inherent in a triadic conference. For example, parents who wish to discuss complex, emotion-laden home problems that are causing students difficulty may prefer that their children not be present. Also, with parents who are highly critical of their children or who neglect them and need counseling, or when the parent and the teacher have a conflict to resolve, students might best be excluded.

A three-person interaction involves more complex interpersonal dynamics than a dyad (Wilmot, 1979). When two people meet they must deal directly with one another during their time together. Among three people, two can talk and exclude the other; two can pair up and impose majority rule over the other; the third person can strengthen or weaken the ties between the other two. Parent-and-child, teacher-and-child, or parent-and-teacher can unify and use the third party as a "common object of opposition." Thus, the triadic "partnership" is not a foregone conclusion. It must be nurtured constantly in order to prevail. The temptation to ally with a supporter and to attack a dissenter is ever-present and alluring when a triad interacts. Teachers need to be alert to this possibility.

Should a teacher decide that a conference including the student is worth a try, several preparations and procedures are advised. First, the teacher should be aware that parents may object initially. Students, too, are likely to feel anxious about it. However, at schools where this approach has been used, with the advantages explained, these concerns were not borne out, and all involved ultimately have come to prefer it. Students can be prepared for their new role by holding a discussion with the class about the upcoming conference—including its general purpose, the steps it is likely to include, and what they might contribute. One teacher held preliminary conferences with each of her students, sharing with them the material to be used and negotiating with them the topics open for discussion. Such a dialogue might begin, "I'm planning to show this work to your parents and to suggest that this is what you need to do in math. Do you see that as appropriate?" If students disagree, their differences can be discussed until some agreement is reached and the students know what is going to happen at the upcoming conference.

Setting the Scene

When conference time arrives, it quickly becomes apparent that school rooms are not designed with this function in mind. Some imaginative rearrangement of furniture often may be needed to create a setting conducive to informal conversation among people who are forging a collaborative working relationship.

When guests arrive, they should find a comfortable waiting area with, if possible, a posted schedule of conference times, a clock, refreshments (such as coffee or juice), and some reading materials with which to pass the time. These props will facilitate awareness of the teacher's schedule and make tolerable whatever wait is necessary. Some simple activities or equipment (drawing paper and crayons, magazines and scissors, checkers) also might be available should children be brought along who aren't to be included in the conference. In fact, a school baby-sitting room would make attending the conference easier for parents with large families.

The conference itself should be furnished with comfortable chairs placed in positions of equal status. Seating the parent across the desk from the teacher establishes a formal, authoritative tone for the conference that enlarges the separation of parent from teacher. In contrast, if teacher and parent sit facing one another in a corner at the back of the room, it usually facilitates an informal exchange. Scheduling conferences as far apart as possible, leaving a ten-minute break between them, also helps to maximize a leisurely pace, a relaxed atmosphere, and smooth progression throughout a series of meetings.

To prevent a strained atmosphere during a series of conferences, it might be best to schedule those most likely to be pleasant and congenial first so that the teacher can have some positive experiences before facing those predicted to be tougher. Also, parents should be told how long the conference will last and why, to avoid resentment at being cut off at the end of the allotted time. (See Activity 1.)

Considering Participants' Orientation

Parents', teachers', and children's lives usually are already deeply intertwined and vivid impressions of each other may have been formed by the time the conference begins. If so, parent expectations and a so-called self-fulfilling prophecy may be working to

subvert whatever goals a teacher may intend. Since people can't help anticipating what others are like or what will happen between them, it behooves a teacher to spell out what assumptions should underlie the conference.

Some teachers send a letter home or even call each parent at the beginning of the school year, emphasizing their desire for a harmonious partnership and opening a communication channel with them right from the start. Well before the anticipated conference time, a letter can be sent home that affirms the teacher's interest in the upcoming meeting, proposes a suggested time for the conference, and contains a tear-off sheet at the bottom for verification of that time or for suggesting an alternative (National School Public Relations Association, 1968).

Just before the conference a reminder can be sent home, giving the teacher's proposed agenda and a checklist containing questions and topics the parent might want to consider during the conference. It might be helpful for parents to return the checklist of items they wish to discuss, so the teacher can be well prepared to handle them. This preliminary exchange and establishment of shared responsibility for the conference helps create a mental set for the kind of collaboration most likely to form a productive home/school alliance. (See Activity 2.)

Students, too, whether as participants or as subjects, have a major stake in the conference and should be included in the preliminary orientation process. They can be asked to identify goals, suggest topics, and prepare materials for the conference.

Gathering Data

Sound educational decisions must be based on shared information regarding the matters involved. For teachers, parents, and students to comprehend accurately what has occurred and to plan appropriately for the future, data about each party needs to be accessible. Prior to a conference the teacher is primarily responsible for accumulating information and making it available to those concerned.

A work folder can be prepared for each student. This should contain materials representing the full range of their efforts, from work of which they justifiably can be proud, to work reflecting areas needing immediate attention and improvement. These folders can be prepared by the students themselves. A work folder might include a table of contents, a letter from the student to

their parents, and even a blank sheet on which the parents can write a response. Some teachers also have available at the conference an audiotape of the student reading aloud, which they play for the parents in order to indicate reading patterns that need attention (Lipton and Kaplan, 1978).

For their own reference, teachers should have classroom and standardized achievement test scores, as well as information from any specialty teachers (reading, speech, physical education, music, art) relating to each student. These data can be entered on a general checksheet of skills and attitudes, to ease record keeping and retrieval.

On the basis of such material, teachers should prepare a list of each student's specific strengths and achievements to report at the conference, and, also, identify one high-priority, well-focused area needing improvement. The list of positive elements will provide a record of the student's capacity to succeed. Acknowledging these builds the commitment and confidence required for working on the area of weakness.

The areas to be addressed at each conference can also be predetermined by the parents and students themselves. Some teachers, several weeks prior to the conference, send home a form on which parents are asked to list the questions and topics they want to discuss at the meeting. Students, too, can be asked to offer a list of information and issues they want to have aired at the conference (Instructor, 1977).

In addition to information about the individual student, some general data applicable to the whole class and its procedures should be made available. One teacher prepares a booklet for parents containing a summary of the curriculum for that year and the materials and methods used to cover it, a list of ground rules for school and classroom behavior, an invitation to sign up for several parent roles (aide, tutor), a guide to the homework policy and the ways in which parents can productively assist their children at home, a bibliography of recent, worthwhile publications intended for parents, and a list of community resources they might find useful for their children (Bellanca, 1978). (See Activity 3.)

Establishing Objectives

Armed with the relevant information, the teacher needs to set specific objectives for the upcoming conference. Some are likely to be general, long-range aims that apply to every contact with the home.

These include such self-evident goals as building a sense of mutual understanding and partnership with the parents, orienting them to what the school and the teacher are trying to do, demonstrating interest and receptivity to the parents' wishes. The parent-teacher-student collaboration often takes time to develop, so it can be sensible to forego some immediate concerns and to stress interpersonal rapport and common ground in attitudes and goals.

Next, a sheet should be prepared for each student, listing what the teacher wants to learn from the parents (phrased as questions to be posed during the conference). The sheet should include information about the student to tell the parents about the child's performance (referring to the data and checklist that has been compiled) and decisions or plans that need to be made during the conference (Ré, 1975).

The teacher should realize that the conference time is likely to pass quickly, so these objectives should be ranked in order of priority, to avoid dwelling on trivialities while major issues go overlooked. Also, since a conference is a collaborative effort, teachers should be responsive to unforeseen issues that might be raised by parents (or whoever else may be present at the conference) that might overshadow their own in importance. (See Activity 4.)

Activities 1, 2, 3, and 4

Activity 1: Parent Orientation. When they arrive at the school, parents need to be oriented to the overall arrangments for the conference session, especially if theirs is one of a series. To provide for this orientation, prepare either a large poster (to be placed where the parents enter or wait for the conference) or a handout on which you inform them about the overall schedule for the conference period, the time allotted for each one, where facilities are located (restrooms, water fountains, refreshments), other places they may visit in the building, and what provisions are made for children who have to wait for them.

Activity 2: Preconference Letters. The parent-teacher interaction needs to be "shaped" for optimal collaboration from the beginning of the school year through to the end. To facilitate this process, prepare the following:

> A letter to parents (or a summary of what you might say in a telephone call) to be sent at the start of school, informing them of (a) what you hope to accomplish in

the coming year, (b) what kind of relationship you hope to establish with them, (c) how they can get in touch with you if they have something to discuss, and (d) how you plan to maintain contact with them in the future.

A "Conference Preparation" letter to be sent two weeks before the conference, summarizing its intent, suggesting possible topics for discussion, and providing a way for them to inform you about the topics in which they are most interested.

Activity 3: Gathering Data. A wide range of data must be synthesized and made meaningful for conference interaction. To be optimally efficient and prepared, several general data sheets should be in readiness. Prepare the following for the class you are (or will be) teaching:

A "Student Information" form—including a list of major areas of the curriculum and subheadings of specific skills under each—with columns at the side for entering levels of student attitude and achievement (doing well, needs improvement, enjoys, dislikes). Include a list of classroom behavior areas (promptness, social relations, completion of work) with headings alongside under which outstanding areas and deficiencies can be noted.

A "Student Contribution" form—including a note to students which welcomes their contribution to an upcoming parent conference and asking what topics they would like to have discussed.

A "Colleague Contribution" form—including a note which could be sent to other teachers, special educators, counselors, administrators, and the like, informing them of an upcoming conference with a particular parent and asking for information, questions, or requests they would like to have presented at the conference.

A "Parent Orientation" booklet—including: (a) summaries of your curriculum, materials, and methods, (b) the classroom and school ground rules, (c) the role parents can play in facilitating the school's efforts, (d) a bibliography of relevant readings, and (e) a list of community resources.

Activity 4: Conference Objectives. Each conference requires its own particular "game plan." To expedite your preparation of these, provided below is a prototype "Conference Preparation" sheet which can be used to quickly note, and then recall, objectives and an agenda for each conference. Select one student in your class, or a child you have had an opportunity to observe, and fill in the items called for on this form as you would if you were preparing to confer with that child's parents:

1. Child's name.
2. Parents' names.
3. Date of conference.
4. Topic for discussion: _____(fill in topic)_____
   a What I want to learn about the topic.
   b. What I want to say about the topic.
   c. What I want to decide and plan about the topic.
   d. Observations and outcomes for the topic.

Repeat item 4 for each topic, listed in order of priority.

2 Conference Content

The moment when the conference actually begins can be a tense one for all involved. Impressions are formed quickly—thus a greeting at the door, a warm introduction, and a courteous escort to a chair are obvious first steps. The parent's visit often demands special home arrangements, a long walk or ride to school, and perhaps a frustrating search for a parking space and for the right room in a maze of hallways, so acknowledgment and appreciation of the effort may be in order.

Identifying Concerns

The teacher-parent role relationship is not fixed by tradition in contemporary American society, so it must be re-established as each new contact is made. Consequently, a comment about the status of the parent vis-à-vis the teacher could be made at this point (for example, "I am looking forward to sharing ideas and working together with you so that John gets as much as possible out of school this year."). The norms or rules for conference interaction are being sought at this stage, as well, so these can be clarified next (for example, "I intend to be frank and specific with you about our experiences in class thus far, and I hope you will share your perspective openly and honestly with me, as well."). Parents' reactions (both verbal and nonverbal) to the teacher's initiatives will provide clues as to whether their future interaction will proceed as the teacher hopes, or whether the parents' posture toward the teacher is set in a different manner.

Most likely, parents are entering the room with some invisible "baggage," a hidden agenda regarding comments, topics, questions, and reactions to be aired at this meeting. Until the most prominent of these are explored, parents will not be fully receptive to what the teacher has to say. An appropriate opening, therefore, might be "Is there anything you would like to say or ask about your child's experiences in school this year?" The

objectives here are to give parents "space" to voice whatever is uppermost in their minds, to indicate the teacher's receptivity and interest in them, and to begin identifying the topic areas to be addressed in the conference. (See Activity 5.)

It is unnecessary at this point to respond in detail to every matter the parent raises. It is sufficient to identify the core issues implied in their comments, to paraphrase them (perhaps even jotting them all down on a note-pad), to indicate the teacher's understanding, and to assure the parent that each topic will be considered (if time allows) during the meeting. Next, the teacher should provide an overview of matters of mutual concern, combining the teacher's topics with those mentioned by the parent in a brief list or agenda. This process provides an order and preview for what is to come and establishes joint responsibility for the ensuing dialogue.

Sequencing Stages

As each topic area is brought up for discussion, it is best to begin by citing the student's positive accomplishments in that area and by checking out the extent to which parents are aware of them or of other related achievements. This procedure moves the talk toward a success-oriented view, toward recognition and reinforcement of desirable behaviors and attitudes.

To follow up this approach it could be useful to consider what each perceives to be the conditions that made it possible for the student to be successful in the above-mentioned areas. What are the factors at home and at school that "worked" for the accomplishments just cited? This discussion helps to verify that each context plays a part in affecting the student's performance. A repertoire of circumstances and strategies (for example, regular reinforcement, time away from friends, being able to emphasize science) that have a positive influence on this student is being built up which can have great value in the future. After all of the major areas of discussion have been examined, the student's accomplishments and the means for achievement should be summarized to be sure they have been clearly understood as tools to use in planning for the future (McAleer, 1978).

Next, an area needing improvement should be established. It usually is best to focus on only one area at a conference, thereby concentrating everyone's attention on it and optimizing chances for a noticeable change in the near future. This discussion could

start with (a) a brief history of that problem area, which would include a description of what the child does ("Johnny has had several fights on the playground."); (b) an honest account of what the teacher and parent have been doing and feeling when this occurs ("It has upset me, and I have tried reprimanding him and taking away some privileges."); (c) what the student does as a consequence of the parent's or teacher's reaction ("He just seems challenged and resentful and gets back into scuffling soon after."); and (d) what the student seems to be saying by his actions ("Perhaps he believes he only counts when he is dominating or when he is being noticed, even if the reaction is negative.") (Carlson and Hillman, 1975). Then teacher and parent together can examine those previously identified strategies that have led to positive accomplishments and can plan some specific steps that are likely to meet the underlying need, reduce the undesirable behavior, and substitute more adaptive ones ("I will give him opportunities to be a leader in games, praise him when he does well, and send you a weekly report on his schoolyard behavior. Perhaps you can provide a small reward for each week that he receives a positive report?"). Tentative plans such as these should be examined until one is mutually agreed upon. Then specific actions to be performed by each party should be specified and a procedure (such as a note, a phone call, or another conference) should be established for checking up on the system's effectiveness. (This postconference follow-up is discussed in Section 6 in greater detail.)

When parents and teachers hear, understand, consider, and act upon each other's concerns in a meaningful way, they have done something very mutually gratifying. Hence, an affirmation of the sharing and effort involved, as well as a summary of what has been covered and agreed upon at the conference, are apt ways of wrapping it up. (See Activity 6.)

Informing the Parent

The conference provides a concentrated opportunity for the teacher and parent to share their worlds. Students live in and are affected by both, yet they usually are unreliable as intermediaries or informants because their accounts can be spotty and biased. For each partner in the educational process to become thoroughly informed about the other's domain, a direct and consistent link needs to be maintained between home and school. A

variety of information must flow through that channel, much of which can be addressed at the conference.

Teachers should inform parents about the content of their children's curricula. This includes the topics being covered, their sequence through the year, and their relative importance. The methods of instruction used to achieve curriculum objectives are especially in need of explanation. Since they are based largely on a school or a teacher's style or preference, they are more likely to be challenged by parents. These include what is being done and why, especially for certain kinds of methods, such as indirect instruction through experiential activities ("How are field trips, group discussions, art projects, and the like, a justifiable use of school time?"), new approaches to traditional subjects ("Why aren't math, reading, science being taught the way I learned them?"), and individualized instruction ("Why isn't my child being treated like all the others?"). Teachers' reward and penalty systems, their approach to discipline and grading, also must be understood by parents—both in terms of how they are organized and their underlying rationale. Parents should also be informed of how their children can use extra initiative or interest to go beyond minimal expectations of the classroom program.

Parents especially want feedback about the particular aptitudes, achievements, and attitudes of their own children. Of course, test scores need to be shared, with accompanying information and qualifications about their validity, their use in school, and what they measure. The teacher's observations of the student's interaction with the curriculum, classroom and school rules, classmates, and the teacher can be reported. This includes the student's work habits and apparent attitudes in regard to each facet of school life, especially wherever the student seems to show special interest or ability, or latent strengths that can be built upon. This area of teacher-parent communication is especially sensitive since it involves semisubjective judgments about the unseeable territory within the student's mind and heart (Association for Childhood Education International, 1969).

There are several ways to minimize the dangers of misjudging students. The feedback given to parents should begin with description of the student's overt behavior and work performance. The teacher should avoid attaching evaluations about right or wrong, good or bad, nice or naughty, whenever possible and should be specific and concrete, rather than general or abstract (for example, "Mary did not do the reading required last week in

social studies." vs. "Mary is lazy."). Students should be described in terms of how they might better use their own abilities, rather than comparing any one student to the others or stressing inadequacies ("Mary could improve her reading speed if she did a few pages in her workbook at home every night." vs. "Mary is one of the slowest readers in the class.").

In this regard, a conference is an ideal time for clarifying how parents can supplement the school's efforts at home. Teachers can explain their rationale for requiring homework and what role parents should play in helping their children with it. They can discuss children's television watching, reading, involvement in the church and community activities, and other uses of leisure time. These activities sometimes can be valuable supplements to the school's educational program if they are selected and discussed with curriculum themes in mind. (See Activity 7.)

Activities 5, 6, and 7

Activity 5: Questioning Parents. How questions are posed affects the kind of information obtained from parents. Curwin and Fuhrman (1975) identify five kinds of questions:

1. Questions eliciting a yes or no answer.
   Example: "Are you aware of Jack's homework problems this year?"
2. Questions eliciting a simple, short, factual answer.
   Example: "Who at home takes the greatest interest in his work?"
3. Questions that take some immediate thinking to find the correct answer.
   Example: "What does Jack do during the time when he might be doing homework?"
4. Questions that require consideration of underlying relationships, for which there are many possible responses.
   Example: "What do the activities in which Jack invests the most energy seem to have in common?"
5. Questions that ask for divergent thinking, including personal opinions and responses, and solutions to hypothetical situations for which there are no "correct" answers.
   Example: "What do you believe is the main purpose of Jack's education?" "What might be my appropriate role and yours

in achieving that purpose?" or "How do you think Jack might react if I exempted him from all homework? If I checked his homework every day?"

This activity calls for you to generate a full range of questions, especially those that involve parents in thinking through students' problems with you during the conference. Identify two of your students with specific problems and imagine yourself in a conference with one of their parents. Develop five questions in regard to each student, one for each of the categories described above. Possible topics for discussion are: playground fighting, need for remedial reading work, excessive absence.

Activity 6: Integrating Student Experiences. The steps described for exploring unsatisfactory student behaviors and relating them to those behaviors in which the student succeeds are significant but difficult to apply. To gain facility with this, select one student you know or draw upon memories from your own childhood to answer these questions:

What were two positive, successful accomplishments or activities?

What aspects of the circumstances in which they occurred seemed to aid the achievement of each (for example, brought approval, was a leader, used mechanical or artistic abilities, were outdoors, were short-term)?

What was one unsatisfactory behavior?

How did the others affected by it (for example, parent, teacher) feel and think about it? (What meaning did they give it?)

What did they do in response to it? (scold, punish, tolerate)

What did the student do as a consequence of these responses?

What does the student seem to be saying by that activity and his or her reaction to the parent's or teacher's response? (What other meanings can be given to what the student is doing?)

How might the circumstances leading to the positive accomplishments be recreated in the context of steering the student away from the unacceptable activity?

Activity 7: Interviewing Parents. Besides telling parents about activities and achievements in school, teachers can learn a great deal about their students by using conference time to ask parents

about them. The parents can recount earlier school experiences, both unusually positive or negative ones, that still are likely to be affecting their children. They can report special interests, abilities, or achievements children have demonstrated at home, which the teacher might use to motivate them or suggest as a theme in classroom activities such as creative writing, group sharing, or art work. The roots of students' classroom behavior patterns often are illuminated through asking parents about the physical set-up where children read, study, and do their homework, about responsibilities their children are asked to assume around the house, and about the nature of their relationships or how they interact with family members and neighborhood friends. Sometimes special circumstances, such as a recent divorce or death, or grandparents or other relatives living in the home, also can affect a child's performance at school. The parents' fundamental values regarding the purpose of an education, what the school should be emphasizing, what future they anticipate for the child, what sex-role stereotypes they adhere to, and so on, can be useful in understanding how students approach their classroom experiences.

Students themselves, whether as participants in a conference with their parents present or with the teacher alone, can provide much information useful in planning an educational program that is well suited to their needs. Their views of school and how it fits into their lives—now and in the future—can affect their performance, as can their reactions to elements in the curriculum, the text material, the teacher's behavior, and their interaction with classmates. Students differ in regard to the educational stimuli from which they learn best (reading, listening, discussing, doing), in regard to what they view as a meaningful incentive or reinforcement, (grades, praise, a job well done, a position of responsibility), and in regard to the environmental conditions that enhance or obstruct their learning (level of noise in the room, seating position in the room, working alone or in a group, the length of their attention span). Eliciting this information can greatly help a teacher gain insight into cause-effect patterns underlying past classroom interactions and into how to plan future classroom experiences that are most likely to prove effective.

It is helpful to have at hand a list of questions related to the topics suggested above, to use as a reminder during a conference. For this activity, bring to mind one student in your class and imagine that you have an opportunity to talk with him or her and

then with his or her parents for an extended period of time. Develop a "Key Question Outline" for each of those conferences. Using the suggestions provided above, list at least five questions you might pose in each conference to elicit information about the topics that would most help you to understand and to relate more effectively to that student.

3 Conference Process

Although teachers may be well-armed and well-prepared with information to convey to parents at their conference, what actually is communicated may be just a fraction or even a distortion of their intent. A recent survey revealed that parents believed they knew what a school program was trying to do and what specific materials and activities were for, but teachers' perceptions of their own aims and methods were not at all the same as the parents' perceptions of them (Tizard, 1977). Also, these teachers reported that their greatest frustration came from the lack of understanding and cooperation they received from parents.

Being Understood

The preconceptions people bring to the educational process can color what is communicated at a conference. The brevity and so-called information overload of conferences prevent parents and teachers from getting to know each other as individuals. Hence, instead of talking as persons, their exchange is from one "role" to another. In other words, when they sit down to meet, parents actually are talking to their own "images" of what teachers are like rather than to the real person in front of them (and vice versa). Whenever they have individualized impressions of one another, those usually are built upon messages carried between them by students acting as intermediaries—and those rarely are objective or accurate.

One's image of the parents' or teachers' role often has roots in childhood experiences. Some of us were conditioned to see the other group (or ourselves) as experts or ultimate authorities to be respected and obeyed; others see them as stuffed-shirt oppressors to be avoided or attacked. Once teachers' and parents' roles had clear, traditional definitions. Now there is great variety among the preconceptions people bring to an educational conference. As Robert Coles (1977, p. 417) points out:

> For millions of children whose parents are poor or are of the so-called working class, a schoolteacher is himself or herself a rather privileged and educated person. For moderately well-off children the teacher is an equal of their parents; maybe not a model one holds up, but certainly an acceptably proper and respectable person, in most cases. Among young children from quite well-off or rich families, however, the teacher can be . . . regarded with a certain tolerant good humor as aides of sorts—not servants, but not by any means one's *equals*.

Consequently, it is useful to note parents' preconceptions and recognize that they will affect how the teacher's messages are heard.

Communication in a conference occurs along two broad dimensions. First, there is information or content to be exchanged. Second, feelings are involved and relationship processes are occurring. Both kinds of messages are carried along verbal and nonverbal channels.

On the verbal channel, words have the virtually impossible job of conveying to a listener the impressions of a parent or teacher that have been accumulated over weeks, months, or years of interaction with the student being discussed. Terms such as *cooperative*, *lazy*, *sensitive*, or *stubborn* evoke quite different mental images in each person who uses them—as do more precise terms familiar to educators but not to everyone else, such as *remedial work*, *social studies*, and *individualized instruction*. It is very likely that the carefully worded and rehearsed messages each conference participant presents (even smiling or thoughtfully nodding) are being thoroughly *mis*understood (NSPRA, 1970).

On the nonverbal level, many messages are picked up by listeners that the speaker is utterly unaware of sending. Gestures, facial expressions, vocal inflections, the posture and position of conferees affect what each hears the other as saying and the way each feels treated by the other. Although these actions may be exhibited without conscious awareness, they often are assumed to be intentional. In other words, a frown brought on by a headache is seen as a deliberate expression of disapproval, an inadvertant glance in the direction of the clock is seen as signaling a desire to wind up the conference, a sigh and shift of posture is seen to imply boredom or exasperation.

In sum, communication in conferences is fraught with barriers and is subject to misunderstanding. The breakdown can occur on the content level—parents can leave confused, forget a vital part of the teacher's message, or report that the teacher said one thing

when something quite different was intended. Or, a breakdown can occur on the relationship level—parents can leave a conference feeling dislike for or feeling bullied by the teacher.

Sensitivity to the several elements in the process of communication can help prevent or repair these breakdowns.

Emphasizing Messages

Information is more likely to be communicated clearly and accurately—and retained afterwards—if it is presented with several concepts in mind. First, people are limited in the amount of new knowledge they can absorb. To avoid overloading and confusing parents, the teacher should list and establish priorities in the information to be shared, and then articulate only one or two residual messages—phrases or sentences that they want the parent to recall most vividly when reviewing the conference later on. The planning and presentation at the conference, therefore, should be geared to clarifying and emphasizing that residual message.

To ensure that the residual message is understood and accepted, it should be conveyed in ways that render it noticeable, believable, and memorable. For example, some people are especially attuned to what they can see and others to what they hear; some people value subjective judgments and others seek facts and figures. Hence, a multimedia presentation, including perhaps examples of students' work, records of test scores reported via graphs or charts, and personal comments by the teacher combine to give parents something to see, hear, think, and feel about the residual message.

Furthermore, such an approach adds redundancy in various forms to a message, thus planting it more clearly and prominently in the listener's mind. A message reiterated in several ways stands out and stays with a person, much as a slogan or jingle gives a listener something to carry away from a television commercial.

Finally, listeners remember better the messages they themselves have been active in formulating. Thus, presenting pertinent data and then asking parents what conclusions they themselves draw from it helps to involve them in developing the residual message. Even if it is presented in a straightforward fashion, asking parents to paraphrase the teacher's message ("I would like to know what basic messages you are getting from what I've said.") can provide feedback about how accurately the teacher is being understood, and it gives the parents a chance to put the teacher's ideas into their own words. (See Activitiy 8.)

The relationship level also requires heightened sensitivity for successful communication to occur. It can be conveyed in the words, choice, tone, and expressions of content-centered messages. It is useful to distinguish among and direct special attention to the ways people indicate how they feel about each other as the conference progresses. This dimension of the collaboration between the participants affects how the information exchanged actually is received and used, how cooperative each is with the other, how trusting, open, and caring they are. Since this dimension can have a ripple effect extending far beyond the confines of the conference and since its impact is often beneath awareness, it will be given extensive exploration in the remainder of this section.

Achieving Compatibility

The fact that teachers and parents have the student as a common focus of concern does not guarantee that they will work together as a harmonious team. In fact, so much is at stake and based on point of view in their interaction that the potential for struggle or alienation between them is very high. They must work to develop a fundamental sense of compatibility or of being on the "same side." Each must feel points of contact, understanding, and common ground with the other. Each should sense that the other knows and accepts where the other is "coming from." Over a series of conferences, teachers often must deal with a wide range of parents. They must size up and adapt quickly to each conferee to achieve compatibility.

Parents' approaches to conferences are based on their long- and short-range goals for them. These may be called their basic motivations and their immediate purposes. There are many theories that attempt to explain why people behave as they do—or what motivates them. A common theory states that individuals differ in the degree to which they emphasize achievement (doing well), affiliation (being liked), and power (getting ahead). Parents bring value priorities such as these to the conference and want the school to stress the one(s) they view as most important.

Imagine a parent who sees school only as a stepping stone to an upwardly mobile life-style, as a place to learn how to get ahead (power), talking with a teacher who views the school's primary goal as helping children learn to work and play together cooperatively and amicably (affiliation) or to pursue and complete tasks

to the best of their ability (achievement). Each is likely to feel derogated by the other; a subtle struggle for control may take place, and they may emerge from the conference seeing each other as enemies. On the other hand, if the teacher were to become aware of the parent's perspective at the outset, were to validate its worth, and were to point out ways in which the curriculum is relevant to that goal, then the parent would be more likely to see the teacher as an ally. The parent might then view more positively the teacher's suggestions regarding goals in the other domains, as well.

Similarly, where the parent is "coming from" relates to his or her immediate purposes for the conference period itself. A parent often has an implicit set of expectations for what is supposed to occur at the meeting with the teacher. Unless this plan is aired and dealt with early in the interaction, it is likely to remain in the forefront of the parent's mind, leaving little mental room for fully absorbing and dealing with what the teacher has to say.

In sum, a conference is best begun by giving parents encouragement and time to voice what they believe the school should be doing for their child, how satisfied they are that these long-range goals are being met, and what current concerns they would like to deal with at the conference.

Generally, people feel best when interacting with others who seem similar to themselves. Thus, parents who perceive teachers as having similar background elements, beliefs, ways of behaving, and so on, are more inclined to view them as being like themselves, as people they can expect to be understanding and approving of them.

Compatibility can be affected by how people communicate as well as by what they say. For example, some people are used to describing their thoughts in extended, elaborated verbalizations; others are not accustomed to putting inner experiences into words. The latter operate more intuitively, nonverbally—through handling objects, through overt action, or through pictures. At conferences, teachers should stress whichever mode of communication is appropriate.

Similarly, some parents accept as a norm that teachers can be questioned, challenged, offered suggestions. Others imagine that such actions would be viewed as an affront and wait for the teacher to take all the initiative. Although both groups may have queries, complaints, and ideas, each needs to be treated differently in order to have their concerns brought out on the table.

Parents differ, too, regarding the kinds of ideas they prefer to handle. Some work comfortably with abstractions, theories of

education, and philosophical issues—such as balancing freedom and discipline, alternating differentiation and integration of ideas, or developmental stages of learning. Other parents prefer concrete, clearly structured, black or white answers that give them a firm and clear idea of what is best for their child. They are drawn to dealing with someone who seems to know what he or she is doing, while the former group of parents might see such an approach as rigid and authoritarian. Some feeling-out of parents in regard to issues such as language use, interaction norms, and cognitive style, should be on the teacher's mind during the early stages of a conference. (See Activity 9.)

People also tend to have greater regard for others who appear more physically attractive, better dressed, outgoing, and sociable. Consequently, parents are most likely to feel compatible with an agreeable, pleasant-appearing extrovert. The teacher need not go so far as to pretend to be these things to be accepted in a conference—they aren't absolutely essential—but they do serve to enhance initial compatibility.

Once the parent-teacher interaction is launched, good will between them is likely to improve as time goes on. Generally, people seem to grow in mutual liking the longer they are in one another's company. So, if first contacts seem tense or awkward, the teacher will do well to continue talking and, with time, the relationship is more likely to improve than to deteriorate.

The approach advocated thus far in this section may seem to cast the teacher in the role of an accommodater, adapting like a chameleon to the varied nature of each parent encountered. Although such flexibility can be helpful, this is not the only stance recommended. The aspects of compatibility mentioned above are those that are relatively fixed in people and least susceptible to change. One is better off yielding to rather than resisting them. There are others, however, that are malleable even in the context of a brief conference. Teachers can affect how compatible they are with parents by influencing several aspects of parents' behavior. These will be discussed in the following sections.

Confirming Parents

Although conferences are for collaboration, parents often report that their interactions with teachers actually undermine their confidence in their own ability to work productively with their children. They feel hurt and blamed by how the teacher discusses

their children's shortcomings. They become defensive and throw up their hands in despair of being helpful, or they come to see the school and home as separate, unaligned entities, each filling distinct, mutually exclusive roles (Rabbitt, 1978).

This pattern occurs when parents emerge from a conference feeling "put down" or maligned. The teacher may not have had any conscious intent of conveying such a message; in fact, the hope could well have been to support and encourage the parent to take an active role as a vital participant in the educational process. Remembering their own school days, however, many parents enter a conference feeling "one down" at the start, and thereby unconsciously set up an interaction wherein the teacher is on a pedestal and the parents are relegated to a subordinate role—one they subsequently come to resent. As a common result, they begin to avoid further dealings with the power figure they themselves have helped to create!

Some teachers find this pattern gratifying, but in the long run it serves to deprive them of an alliance that can enhance the effectiveness and satisfaction of their work lives. Hence, it behooves teachers to invest effort in confirming parents, in encouraging them to value their own unique capacity to play a significant role alongside the school as active participants in their children's education. There are several ways that people can deliberately introduce a confirming approach to their interaction with others.

The first element in such an approach is recognition of and valuing the other's very presence in the interaction. This can be done by verbally affirming the teacher's appreciation of the parent's attendance at the conference. Giving full attention and "tuning in" to what the parents have to say, facing them, making eye contact, leaning toward them as they speak conveys more emphatically than do words that they are important participants in what is occurring. Acknowledging their comments as they speak, with such minor gestures as a smile, an "I see," a brief paraphrasing of their essential message, and the feeling of caring or concern that underlies it—all help support a basic affirmation of the worth of their contribution (Friedman, 1979).

Another element in confirmation is responding to the concerns parents raise in the conference. People feel respected by others who become involved with what they care about, whose comments are relevant to what they have just said, who speak to the point they initiated. People feel a lack of confirmation when the other person commonly changes the subject, avoids touchy issues

that are raised, or relates a story that is only minimally related to the individual's concern at the time. Similarly, a very one-sided conversation, in which there is little reciprocation of self-disclosure, of expressions of feeling, or of energy and involvement, disconfirms the person investing the larger proportion of self in it. Therefore, parents feel confirmed by a teacher who looks at, who explores openly, who attends to and shares with them the areas of their own (and their children's) lives that they themselves introduce into the conversation.

Sometimes parents express an opinion—about their child, the school or even the teacher—that seems unfounded; they express a feeling (such as anger or fear) that seems out of proportion to the situation triggering it, or they voice a complaint or raise a problem that seems easily resolvable by an approach which the teacher knows. It is tempting at such junctures to leap to the rescue and provide contrary information, a piece of good advice, or an obvious solution to alleviate their concern. Most of us don't want confused or upset people to endure their discomfort a moment longer than necessary—especially if we believe we have an antidote. However, it is important, too, to keep in mind that in these cases the person in the "hero" role essentially is denying the other's view of reality. Although the content of the message ultimately may prove very helpful, it is based on a relationship assumption and the implied message, "I know how to handle things better than you do" (Gordon, 1974).

What if the parents do seem to be wrong or in need of guidance? To agree with them would be to collude in a misconception. At such a point, it would prove helpful to differentiate between acceptance and acknowledgment of their message—simply "getting" or hearing what they have to say—and agreement with it. People do not need to have agreement to feel confirmed. A sense of having their comments received as intended, not immediately dismissed as erroneous or distorted, is a vital element in the process of confirmation.

Teachers need to be especially alert to imposing interpretations on parents' messages, instead of accepting and acknowledging them. This applies to reactions such as "You don't really feel that way, you're only imagining that you do," "You're just saying that; I know you don't mean it," "You don't really want to do that, do you?," or "You have no right to react that way, after all we have done for you." Each of these comments fails to confirm someone's thoughts or emotional processes. It is especially point-

less to argue about feelings. They arise as reflexlike reactions to stimuli. Feelings are better allowed to be experienced fully, to be openly expressed, and to be heard with empathy. Only then is a person actually open to reexamining with some objectivity the event that triggers the emotion and to reevaluating his or her own reaction to it (Long, 1976).

To withhold confirmation from an emotionally charged comment leaves the parents in what has been termed a double-bind. They are in a no-win situation. If they agree with the interpretation ("I guess I didn't really mean it."), they must deny their own feelings or admit to being foolish or ungrateful. If they disagree ("I certainly did mean it!"), they will incur the disdain or wrath that lies behind the teacher's interpretation. Either way, they are under considerable strain, and hence are likely to withdraw from further open, authentic interaction in that context—a wary, game-like exchange becomes substituted for honesty.

A final element in the process of confirmation is the so-called ego-state from which each party in the conference is speaking. Eric Berne (1964), among others, refers to three positions from which people address one another: the "Parent," the "Adult," and the "Child." The Parent approach is either critical ("I know what you should do.") or nurturing ("Let me *help* you."). Either posture assumes a superior, all-knowing, take-care-of role vis-à-vis the other. Most often, a Parent approach is likely to elicit a Child reaction. As a result, if the Parent ego-state is assumed by the teacher, the parent will feel put down or dependent—both are forms of withholding confirmation and are hardly ideal relationships to form in that liaison. Many parents will instigate such an interaction by approaching the conference in a helpless or irate way (both are Child ego-states), thus triggering a Parent response from the teacher, and thereby setting up their own refusal of confirmation!

This pattern often can be avoided if the teacher remembers that every individual also has within him an Adult ego-state, even though it may not at first be apparent. The teacher needs to speak to parents as Adults, to affirm parents' ability to think through their own concerns, and to support parents' capacity to carry out whatever course of action they deem mutually acceptable. For example, if a parent complains (from a helpless Child ego-state) that his son is uncontrollable at home, instead of scolding or advising him (buying into being the Parent), the teacher can ask a series of questions such as: What have you tried to do about that?

How well have each of those methods worked? What other approaches have you considered, but not yet given a try? Which among those do you believe is most likely to prove effective? What might you do to put that approach into practice? How might I be of assistance to you in carrying out the plan you are proposing? Such an approach addresses the intelligent, problem-solving side of the parent—the Adult—and gives it space in which to operate. This approach serves to confirm the parent as a capable, collaborative partner, as do all of the ways—recognition, relevance, reciprocation, and acceptance—mentioned in this section. (See Activity 10.)

Activities 8, 9, and 10

Activity 8: Emphasizing Messages. The condensation of the report to parents into a memorable residual message is another process that requires practice. Imagine that you have caught a student cheating on a test. The student generally lacks faith in his or her ability to learn, copies assignment material from an encyclopedia, worries excessively about grades, is concerned with work appearance rather than content, asks endless questions about your expectations for every task, and so on. What might be a residual message you would want the student's parents to recall from the conference? What are at least three different ways you might convey that message? Consider the following presentation:

Residual Message: We must reduce the student's need to please us and enhance the student's own interest in learning.

1. Report on the negative effects of trying *too* hard to do well (for example, cheating on a test).
2. Remind the parent that many professions require initiative and creativity.
3. Show the parent the work that was copied from an encyclopedia.
4. Lend the parent an article on the negative effects of excessive anxiety and stress.
5. Suggest asking the child what she enjoys, what she believes, what she values about schoolwork.

Activity 9: Achieving Compatibility. Adapting the phrasing of a message to the parent's particular point of view can affect how it is received and responded to. For example, imagine that a student

in your class is diagnosed as having an auditory discrimination problem, a condition that explains the student's recent difficulties in reading and one that requires special help in school and at home. Consider how you would explain this problem to the following parents: (a) a busy, working mother who never did well in reading herself and whose primary goals for her daughter are getting along with people, getting married, and raising children; (b) an affluent, intellectually oriented mother who expects her daughter to go on to college and to have a successful career of her own. Write out the exchange you might have in a conference with each of these parents. The parents may differ in regard to their long-range goals for education, their goals for that conference, the initiatives they make, the data they attend to, and the responses they are seeking. Your dialogue should reflect these differences.

Activity 10: Confirming Self and Other. Transforming an interaction from one that is potentially disconfirming into one based on mutual confirmation requires practice. Imagine what your first response would be in each of these two situations:

> You are a music teacher, and Mrs. Smith reports to you that her daughter won't practice the band pieces you assign because they are too "old-fashioned."
>
> You are a physical education teacher, and Mr. Jones complains to you that his son is very disappointed about not making a team and believes that the other people were picked on the basis of personality rather than ability.

Write out what you would say in regard to the issue raised, in a way that acknowledges the child's and the parent's views and feelings about the event, and that affirms your point of view without disparaging theirs.

4 Conference Conflict

Harmonious conferences can be very pleasant, productive experiences. So much so, in fact, that teachers welcome them, value them, try to avoid disharmony, and even pretend that harmony exists when tensions lie smoldering under the surface. However, when a "nice," positive conference is seen as essential, and conflicts are avoided, in the long run the parent-teacher relationship is debilitated.

Approaching Conflict

A genuine partnership rarely is free of conflict, especially when it must endure over a long period of time and involves processes in which participants have a significant stake. When a parent or a teacher sees the other as being hostile or uncaring, resents that attitude, and thus senses the potential for conflict exists, but avoids it, a chain reaction often occurs. One (or both) becomes defensive and withdraws from the other—thereby reducing communication between them, which reduces mutual understanding of one another's goals and attitudes, which increases mutual suspicion, which increases interpretations of hostility and uncaring between them, and which ultimately exacerbates their conflict. Hence, avoidance of conflict simply intensifies the situation.

On the other hand, when open conflict is permitted and handled skillfully, bad feelings do not accumulate, differences are aired, trust develops, creative risky ideas can be discussed, and more energy is available for shared activity. Of course, conflicts are instances of uncertainty. Because disparate views and anxious or angry feelings are in the air, the outcome of the interaction genuinely is in doubt. If participants basically want things to flow smoothly, it is tempting to resist taking this risk. Further, for people who rarely deal with conflict, such an episode tends to remind them of times in the past, even in childhood, when "fights" of any kind turned out to be painful and destructive.

As a result, most parents and teachers resort to one of a few common strategies whenever a conflict arises. They fear an open discussion of differences and imagine that something ugly will happen if it persists, so they seek to squelch disagreement as quickly as possible. Some do so by dominating the other, by insisting on their own point of view ("I'm right." "It must be done my way.") without acknowledging or even really hearing what the other has to say. Others react by immediately placating the other, by accommodating to what the other wants ("Whatever you say.") without leveling openly or firmly about their own viewpoint. Still others try to cut short any conflict by joking, by avoiding the debated issue ("We'll see." "One of these days we'll . . . ."), by seeking a quick compromise, by blaming someone else, by referring the issue to a third party, or by some other means trying to push the conflict under the rug and out of sight.

Such tactics are understandable when we consider the potential costs of a destructive conflict. However, there are procedures that can optimize the chances for a conflict to be managed constructively. Some apply generally to virtually all conflict situations, and others are relevant in specific circumstances depending on who is the initiator of the dispute. Each procedure will be examined in turn.

Guiding Conflict

There is no way to guarantee that all conflicts will turn out well. However, it is possible to identify several conditions that seem conducive to conflict resolution. The first is the fundamental motivation on the part of both participants to return ultimately to a point of amicable agreement. If one is using the argument as a vehicle or as an excuse to "get" the other, to prove the other wrong, to expose or humiliate the other, then no approach will work satisfactorily.

A second condition is an agreement or norm that an open, honest exchange is desirable. When either party insists upon excluding an area of content, a feeling, or a point of view from consideration that the other sees as vital, a barrier is raised that precludes full resolution or clearing-up of the conflict. Even in a school conference, some availability to a "feelingful" exchange is preferable to being only patronizingly detached, logical, or mechanistic with parents. Conflicts arouse feelings, and if these aren't allowed, faced, and dealt with overtly, they will continue

to operate under the surface and can have the effect of sabotaging reasonable exploration of the conflict issue.

A third condition is a balance of power or equivalency of impact between the participants. Authentic communication and power discrepancies do not mix well. Feeling threatened inhibits the openness needed to explore a conflict fully. If people involved in superior-subordinate role relationships (teacher-student, principal-teacher) are to argue without allowing the power imbalance to pollute their discussion, the more vulnerable person must trust the person with greater authority, and they must feel that they will not be penalized for their views. Equals fight most fairly and effectively, so the more powerful figure in a superior-subordinate relationship must at least temporarily put aside all privileges of authority and invite a "just-for-the-here-and-now" encounter as simply two human beings leveling with one another.

The approach to conflict advocated here clearly takes time (the fourth condition) to carry out. A clear-the-air conversation will not prove effective if wedged into a very brief conference, to be followed immediately, at a specified time, by a series of other conferences. Should conflicts arise in such brief encounters, they are best side-stepped and put off for another occasion (for example, "I believe we have differing points of view about how reading skills are developed, which would take more time than we have now to discuss adequately. I would be happy to talk with you further about it. Would you like to make an appointment for next week?").

Finally, for conflict management to be successful, there needs to be an appropriate balance between the processes of differentiation and integration of participants' views. On the one hand, the uniqueness, the differences in each person's perspective, must be clearly understood and honored. The points of contention and each individual's stance in regard to them must be clarified, usually at the start. Then, on the other hand, the points of commonality, of harmony, must also be clearly understood and honored. The points of agreement, which often can be taken for granted—such as the basic warmth or respect the participants have for one another, their common goals in the situation, elements which they do see in the same way, and even an affirmation of their willingness to disagree openly—are all worthy of mention. If differentiation and integration factors are mentioned proportionately, if there is room for "me" and for "we" in the interaction, the process of conflict management is likely to produce mutual gain. (See Activity 11.)

Receiving Criticism

A conflict usually begins when a parent or a teacher does not like something the other has done, is doing, or plans to do. The teacher sometimes is feeling and voicing the unsatisfied position, and sometimes is on the receiving end, hearing the parent's complaint. Conflict can surface when there is a sharing of opinion, a request for change, a questioning of policy, an assertion of position, or a blaming judgment—or in more indirect ways. When the parent is upset and the teacher is perceived to be at fault, assertiveness and blame often emerge; they are the most difficult to handle productively.

A blaming conflict is born in the complainer's mind. A behavior or attitude that is attributed to the teacher violates the parents' image of how the teacher ought to be. The teacher's preference is perceived as wrong, and the parents' as right, fair, or constructive. This conclusion puts the parties on opposite sides: the teacher is perceived as an enemy to the kind of education the parents deem best for their child. A psychological veil falls between the parties and a cloud of tension filters through everything the parents perceive about the teacher.

It is a constant drain on psychic energy to carry around and not disclose such a withheld message. But parents often do repress their misgivings (except for using occasional opportunities to gossip about the teacher and thus temporarily unburden their feelings to someone else). Being cautious, closed off, circumspect, seems safer and more comfortable to many people. It avoids conflict; it avoids facing the anger, revenge, rejection, or whatever else the teacher's reaction is presumed likely to be.

The resentment will persist, however, and begin to show itself in subtle, indirect ways. At the conference, it is evident in the parent's voice, eyes, or posture and the teacher feels it, too. The teacher knows something's wrong and wishes it could be cleared up. Why won't the parent just say what it is, put it out straight, so that it can be looked at openly, together? The teacher even may begin to feel somewhat annoyed while only the shadow of the complaint darkens the encounter.

When people are asked in which situation they feel more comfortable—(1) criticizing someone and asking for a change in what he or she is doing for them, or (2) hearing a complaint and doing a favor for someone else—most people pick the second. A complaint is an expression of need, a request for help, an admission that one is upset. It makes many people uncomfortable to admit

to that. (Others do so too easily, and how to handle that will be discussed later on.) For this kind of parent, the first step for the teacher is to offer a clear "invitation to gripe." This can be in the form of asking generally for questions and feedback, or it can be in reaction to a comment or nonverbal cue that indicates something is bothering the parent ("I'd like to hear what's on your mind." "You seem to be uncomfortable with what I just said; could you share that with me?").

The next step is giving parents ample time to verbalize their view of the situation—that is, not refusing to listen or not reacting as soon as a response comes to mind. The teacher should wait out the whole message, keep an open mind, and even when the parent seems to be pausing and looking for a response, ask, "Is there anything else you would like to say about that?" or "How about _____ ?" (filling in any other topic related to the area of the parent's complaint.)

It is especially important that parents be encouraged to make their messages as concrete and specific as possible. This can be done by asking questions that will elicit the details of the event(s) being described. The journalist's familiar queries are useful here: Who was involved? What was done? When did it happen? Where did this occur? Why do you think each person did what they did? An important question to add for each element of the situation being described is, "How did you feel about that?" or "What was your opinion of that?" These questions will elicit the reactions and judgments being imposed on whatever occurred. (See Activity 12.)

During this period of catharsis, all the teacher needs to do is affirm his or her receptivity and desire to learn the parent's point of view, even if it turns out to be a dissatisfied one. Just paying attention, nodding, and asking brief questions for clarification is sufficient. Many problems actually clear up or diminish in intensity as the strain of holding them in and mulling them over is relieved and they are expressed and heard as intended. At this point, teacher and parent often return to being allies, on the same side of the fence, working together, even if the details of the disputed area have yet to be resolved.

Being Critical

The opposite side of the coin in conflict comes up when the teacher has a complaint about the parent that needs airing. Teachers, too, tend to withhold views about parents' actions for fear of

arousing an unmanageable reaction. The same people usually prefer that parents be perfectly straightforward with them, but they hesitate to do so in return. Perhaps this discrepancy exists because they know how they themselves would react to a confrontation, but they must guess as to how a parent will respond. If they are unused to or uncomfortable about facing someone who might be angry in return, they will assume the worst and project anger into the parent, thereby cutting off their right (or professional responsibility) to tell parents honestly what they think about the element in contention. An explanation often given for this choice is "they probably couldn't handle it" (or "wouldn't understand" or "would get upset"). Sometimes this prediction justifiably can be made—when it is based on actual experience. Otherwise it is unfair to give up hope on the capacity of a parent to hear what the teacher believes they ought to know until it has been given a thorough try. This point is belabored because it is remarkable how often imagined catastrophic parent-teacher conversations are substituted for real ones that, when actually carried out, turn out to be not so bad after all.

Once it has been decided to risk open honesty with a parent regarding an issue that might provoke conflict, it becomes imperative that the points be made in a way most likely to be received with understanding rather than defensiveness.

The first step is getting the parent's permission to raise the issue to be discussed. A critique or confrontation should rarely be forced on someone. If parents also take responsibility for looking at the discussion topic, they are better set to hear what the teacher has to say and less likely to react defensively. Thus it is wise to state, for example, "I would like to share with you my opinion of how you help with your child's homework," or to ask "Would you like to know what I think about how you can help your child with homework?" If the response is affirmative, an agreement has been made that provides a helpful basis for the teacher's subsequent message.

Criticism that is heard with minimal defensiveness usually has several characteristics. First, it is quite concrete in regard to the behavior being described as undesirable ("Bill reports that he doesn't have a quiet spot at home where he can study."). Second, it relates the meaning, opinion, or feeling the teacher has about that behavior ("I am concerned that he do his best in my class."). Third, it reports the consequences or effects of the behavior the teacher sees ("His grades are lower than they could be because his

homework often isn't completed."). Fourth, it assumes the best of intentions, that the parent is doing what seems best and what he or she believes must be done to be effective—which almost always is the case ("I'm sure you are just as concerned as I am that Bill do well in school."). Fifth, it offers only a description of what the teacher sees, thinks, and inwardly feels about it. It informs the parent about how the issue looks to the teacher; final conclusions about how things actually are remain tentative ("Do you see the lack of a quiet work spot as a problem which gets in Bill's way of doing his homework?"). Sixth, it focuses on a single issue at a time; it is not a broad generalization or an overwhelming array of information about a whole range of topics; it is digestible ("I'd like us to support Bill's getting his homework done."). Seventh, it rests upon a base of caring and constructive opinion, rather than being an attack, a judgment, a hopeless sentencing of the parent, child, or situation to failure ("I'm sure he will do better in the weeks ahead.").

Finally, such criticism is based on and points out a value, goal, belief, or wish the parent has expressed, rather than voicing only what the teacher wants. A teacher is more likely to feel hostility toward a parent when that person seems guilty of inconsistent or hypocritical behavior (for instance, this parent may espouse a value of wanting the best education possible for the child and yet does not provide time, space, or assistance when the child has homework to do; or another parent believes the teacher has an obligation to give the child extraordinary or special attention, yet does not consider that this means depriving other students of their right to the teacher's attention). Such instances of incongruity between one's values and actions, one's expectations for self and others, one's thoughts and feelings, lie at the heart of most resentments between people. They can trigger a judgmental, angry outburst, or they can be handled more effectively by pointing out the discrepancy and asking the parent to reconsider the two apparently conflicting aspects ("We want Bill to do well this year and that requires homework, yet it is not getting done—that is a discrepancy we need to discuss."). In this instance, the teacher's effort to obtain more home support for that student is linked to a value already expressed by the parent and thus provides the teacher's request with a measure of inner support or motivation for the parent to move in the desired direction. (See Activity 13.)

If the aforementioned characteristics are present, the message is most likely to be received and seen as useful. Often, however,

the most aptly worded message is perceived as a putdown, and parents' first reaction is to feel a bit hurt, to respond by justifying what they have been doing, withdrawing a bit, or denying the validity of the teacher's perception. The teacher must avoid becoming discouraged at such signs of discomfort, and should not back off or become engaged in a debate. Rather, the teacher should note, hear, and acknowledge the parents' response and seek to identify what aspect of the message has been misunderstood. For example, the parent may have interpreted the teacher as judging, may have generalized his or her comment more broadly than was intended, or may have missed the teacher's optimism that alternatives and a workable solution are available. Rephrasing and repeating the message focuses on the dimension that is triggering the parent. Persistence, even through a series of these awkward exchanges, and patience, skill, endurance, and discussing conflicts openly actually can strengthen the partnership between teacher and parent.

Activities 11, 12, and 13

Activity 11: Clarifying Issues. Conflicts always center on an issue of fact, method (policy), or value (goal). It is vital that discussion be appropriate to the issue being examined because each kind of issue is resolved differently. If conference participants disagree about a fact, information can be obtained to determine what is true or who is right. If participants disagree over method (how to do something), a test or trial can be cited or set up that might help to determine what cause-effect or problem-solution sequence does work most effectively in the disputed case. However, if the participants disagree over what value or goal to strive for, what "should" happen in the schools, what procedure is "good" or "bad," then the sources of the points of view in that conflict lie essentially within each person; they are subjective in nature and often cannot be changed by pointing to anything in the environment or by matching observable actions to objective criteria. Hence, such a conflict can only be resolved through inner, subjective processes—such as when participants become more trusting, caring, empathetic, or open toward one another. Facts are neither good nor bad, nor are values "proven" by facts. Hence, means for exploring conflict must be congruent with the kind of question being raised—otherwise the discussion will seem fruitless.

To practice identifying the kind of issue being discussed, decide which of the statements below relates most closely to a matter of (a) fact, (b) method or policy, or (c) value or goal.

a b c 1. "The average of John's scores was 85."

a b c 2. "Students would do better on the tests if you provided a study guide for them."

a b c 3. "Tests shouldn't be given to third-graders."

a b c 4. "Recess is a time for children to be completely free."

a b c 5. "There would be fewer playground fights if more teachers supervised the children there."

a b c 6. "Mary has had several fights with Jane this week."

Answers: 1, a; 2, b; 3, c; 4, c; 5, b; 6, a.

Activity 12: Receiving Criticism. In order to deal effectively with parents' criticism it is essential to understand fully how they perceive the situation that disturbs them. Bandler and Grinder (1975) propose a useful model for eliciting and clarifying the viewpoints of others. They maintain that everyone's behavior makes sense when seen in the context of their personal conception or model of reality. However, some processes involved in creating models cause unnecessary stress. These are: generalization (assuming that one instance represents a general pattern); deletion (selectively noticing certain events and ignoring others); distortion (enlarging, minimizing, assuming permanence, or otherwise misrepresenting what is happening). These cognitive processes can be detected in how people talk about their experiences. Each of the following examples calls for a model-clarifying response:

Deletion

(Omitting important details)

Example: "I don't understand."
Response: "What don't you understand?"

Example: "This is hard."
Response: "What, specifically, is hard about this for you?"

Example: "The children force me to punish them."
Response: "How, specifically, do the children force you to punish them?"

Generalization and limitation

(Making a noun, or a fixed thing, out of a verb or process)

Example: "I regret my decision."
Response: "Does anything stop you from re-deciding?"

Example: "My son never does anything right."
Response: "Has he *ever* done anything right?"

Example: "I can't tell him the truth."
Response: "What will happen if you do?"
"What stops you from telling him the truth?"

Distortion

(Assuming inevitable cause-effect patterns)

Example: "You frustrate me."
Response: "How do I frustrate you?" or
"How is it possible for me to make you feel frustrated?"

(Assuming mind-reading)

Example: "He never considers the consequences."
Response: "How, specifically, do you know he never considers the consequences?"

(Applying one's rules to others)

Example: "This is the right way to do it."
Response: "This is the right way *for whom* to do it?"

Imagine that you are dealing with parents who are criticizing your handling of their child and who articulate their concern in some of the ways listed below. Using the responses suggested above, how might you respond to each comment in a way that brings to the surface the parents' inner model of what is occurring:

"Your homework assignments are confusing."

"I can't control him."

"Children need discipline."

"It is very important that Sally be picked for the play."

"It is out of my hands."

"It's people like you that keep us oppressed."

Activity 13: Confronting Parents. How might you confront or give feedback to parents who are doing each of the things listed below:

Calling you too often at home about minor details of their son's schoolwork.

Punishing their daughter in a humiliating way for any school grades less than "A."

Being so helpful to their son on homework that the boy still does not understand the concepts involved, even though the tasks are getting done.

Write out what you might say to a parent in each case, keeping in mind the qualities suggested above under the heading "Being Critical."

5 Conference Problem-Solving

Conflicts between parents and teachers often are suppressed or become escalated because they are viewed as struggles, rather than as vehicles for learning and cooperation. A struggle is a battle for supremacy, for determining who will win and who will lose, for identifying who is right and who is wrong. On the surface, most conference conflicts appear only to be about an educational topic—for example, how grades are decided, why a student has been absent so often, what classroom behavior rules are needed. However, they can arouse intense feelings when discussed at a parent-teacher conference. Rarely surfacing to be faced openly, but lying behind such turmoil, almost always are questions such as: Who actually knows what is best for children? Who really cares about them? Whose behavior is selfish (or stupid, or mean)? or, boiled down, Who at this conference is right, good, capable, and who is wrong, bad, ineffectual? When judgments such as these form the basis for the discussion, conflict can indeed be a futile, wheel-spinning, painful experience.

Framing the Problem

The presumption underlying such a struggle is that there is a correct, true, right answer in the situation and that only one party in the conference, the ultimate "winner," has it. The other party is wrong, the "loser." When we keep in mind that teachers have their professional expertise on the line (based on years of training and experience), and that the parents have their family lives on the line (also based on much past history), we realize how much is at stake at every conference and how hard it is to acknowledge the value of the other's point (thus granting one has been wrong all these years) —and we realize why people tend to avoid such scenes at all costs.

This kind of conflict is based upon dysfunctional assumptions, such as: there are identifiable cause-to-effect patterns in educational situations; one behavior or attitude leads inevitably to another; one element in a situation can be blamed for causing its out-

comes; there is only one right way to get something done. All of these paradigms are false and destructive to interpersonal collaboration.

Let us examine these assumptions by applying them to a discussion of why a sixth-grade boy makes wisecracks and disrupts his class. The teacher might maintain that this behavior is occurring because the boy entered the class having been poorly disciplined in the past (that's so); the parent claims other children goad and reinforce his acting-out (they do); the boy feels the curriculum is boring (it is to him); the principal notes the teacher is inconsistent in maintaining behavioral standards (she is). If they are all right (they are!), then what is *the* cause of this problem, who is to blame for it (boy, parent, teacher, class members, curriculum?), and who is it who must change if the problem is to be solved? If these are the questions debated at a conference, a win-or-lose conflict is bound to develop. In actuality, each of the elements involved affects the others; change in any one will affect the others; they are interrelated in an open system. Hence, no one element is the cause and no one is the effect; no one person is the villain and no one is the victim; no single approach to change is essential. All together are cause and effect; all are involved and responsible; all are possible avenues for change.

What do these alternate assumptions imply regarding communication in conferences? First, they should guide the phrasing of what a conference is all about. It is not for the purpose of determining cause or blame. It is for identifying (a) the dissatisfying system, (b) the elements of the system affecting that outcome, (c) the alternative actions that might alter the system, (d) the likely consequences of each action, (e) the action that now seems most desirable, and (f) how it will be carried out.

Second, these assumptions alter how feelings of anger, fear, or hurt are dealt with in the conference—whether in the teacher or in the parent. Behind each usually is an assumption that someone fundamentally is right or wrong, good or bad. An accusation need not elicit a defense or justification of classroom procedure or of home life. Statements of blame should be seen as clues to the thinking upon which they are based. The cause-effect paradigm is very common in our society; it manifests itself in blame-fixing patterns of thought such as: "If it weren't for you, things would be okay for my child." "See what you made him do!" "Yes, that's a good idea, but it wouldn't work with him because that's not the real cause of the problem." Hence, a response to com-

ments like these might be: "You seem to assume that a person (or a procedure) in this situation is right or wrong. Can we just view his behavior as related to many things (or as one which can be changed in many ways)?" (See Activity 14.)

Third, when a cause-effect model is applied to a problem situation, individuals can perceive themselves in the "effect" position—each thereby becoming the helpless "victim" of the other, placing all responsibility for what is occurring, and therefore for whatever change will be needed, on the other person. This pattern is supported by the traditional model of the teacher as the person who is responsible for how education turns out. Hence, when a parent or student puts the teacher at "cause" and themselves at "effect," by asking "What will you do about it?" or "What should we do?," they need to be asked, "How do you want things to be?" "What do you plan to do to make that happen?" They are more likely to carry out whatever plans are made if they themselves have proposed or determined what has been decided.

Fourth, being alert to cause-effect thinking reduces one's vulnerability to reacting impulsively to verbal attacks. When parents or students are upset, there usually are two components to how they express their distress. They refer to a behavior or circumstance that is unacceptable, and they coat it with a negative judgment about the teacher's part in it. Rather than feel insulted by such an attack, it is helpful for the teacher to keep two things in mind. One, the person is trying to put the teacher in the wrong because he or she feels anxious about appearing wrong in that context. This can be true even if the teacher is unaware of presenting any threat. People who have been humiliated in the past are especially sensitive to any cue in the current environment that arouses memories of old hurts.

When the teacher senses a put-down, the response should be divided into two corresponding parts—agreement that the behavior did occur (if it did) and disregard of the judgment component. The parent's remarks should be viewed as an attempt to draw the teacher into a "who's right, who's wrong" debate that has no basis in reality. In other words, if the parent's comment is "You require too much homework," instead of reacting "I don't give too much at all," the teacher might respond, "Yes, I ask them to do about an hour of homework each night. Is that difficult for your son to complete?" Or, the teacher might agree to the judgment, but without guilt or remorse, "Yes, I have required more than many

students can handle." When problems are framed without blame the discussion can proceed effectively into the problem-solving stage. (See Activity 15.)

Solving the Problem

We are now at the point in the conference where a gripe has been aired and heard; an agreement exists that something in the situation or in the participants' behavior needs to be explored and perhaps changed. The next step involves collaborative problem-solving—that is, clarifying the discrepancy perceived between how things are now and how they ought to be, and identifying a method for making the situation change toward the desired state of affairs. Parent and teacher must agree on what the situation currently is, what they wish it to be, and how to go about changing it. They must identify the essential features of the present state, and the forces that might facilitate (or impede) moving from the current to the preferred state. In sum, the information in their conversation must be organized into three interrelated dimensions: the Situation, the Target, and the Plan. Each dimension will be discussed in turn.

The Situation dimension is the starting point; it is an accurate picture of current reality in terms of everyone involved. It includes what is apparent—such as behavior, statements made, nonverbal actions noticed, grades, work done, and not done—and what people infer or report is going on inside—such as meanings given to events, feelings about them, evaluations of actions, predictions about the outcome of efforts to change, guesses as to underlying purposes or unmet needs.

Certain precautions should be kept in mind about this process. First, it should be as comprehensive as possible. The student's view must be included. The home situation and the views of everyone who has impact on the student also are important. The input of other school personnel and even the student's classmates could be relevant. The Situation also includes the givens, the constraints, the real limits of the situation in which the problem is occurring. For example, it might involve stating the relevant classroom or school ground rules which must be adhered to. It might be the limitations in the parent's schedule or financial resources that must be accounted for. These all form the frame or borders within which any Target and Plan must be devised. (See Activity 16.)

Second, the review of the Situation should be done as non-judgmentally as possible. Whatever has happened has happened, and can't be changed now. There is agreement that things haven't turned out as well as might have been hoped, but the past should be viewed as history to be understood, not searched for evidence to be used in an indictment of someone.

Third, the teacher should make sure that there is shared understanding and agreement as to what the Situation is before investing much effort into focusing on the Target and Plan. This can be done by summarizing or paraphrasing what has been said about the Situation and getting affirmation from the parent before proceeding much further.

The Target is the destination, the goal or outcome, desired by those involved. It can include what all parties want and what they want to avoid. This aim must genuinely be valued and desired by them, not imposed. Imposed requirements are the ground rules, the givens, and thus are part of the Situation dimension. Goals not truly wanted by people will generate inner obstacles that will sabotage the Plan. The Target should not be viewed as finding whatever will make any one person (whether the parent, the teacher, or the child) happy, at any cost. If one party in the educational system is gratified at another's expense, the solution generated from that approach is not likely to work. As long as someone feels frustrated or in a position of sacrificing for the other, some demand or resentment will begin to grow which eventually might undermine the whole effort.

Hence, the Target statement must include factors that will allow everyone involved to feel that all parties are being considered and are getting whatever can be done for them. This has been called a win/win solution. For example, school personnel believe that John should repeat a grade, and his parent does not. At a conference, each first hears and accepts the other's view of the Situation. However, each then sets a Target of getting one's own way (that is, retention vs. promotion); even if one person prevails, the other party still is likely to feel that the decision is wrong and perhaps even wants it to fail. Hence, a maximally effective Target might be, "To place John in the grade where he will perform at a passing level." This could be a Target both parties would agree to.

Further, it is essential that the Target be phrased in terms of the end conditions toward which activities are directed, and not in terms of the activities themselves (which is the Plan). The key question is "To accomplish what?" If a Target cannot reasonably

be seen as an answer to this question, it is probably a Plan. For example, the statement "John will read and discuss a short story at home each night" is a Plan; the statement "John will improve his reading comprehension one grade level this semester" is an apt Target statement. Many alternate Plans can be devised to meet this Target. Thus, a useful Target statement allows for listing many alternative Plans, from which the best can be picked and adopted.

Finally, the Target should be specific enough so that everyone involved is able to agree about whether or not it has been realized. The key question is "How will we know when the goal has been achieved?" Having a concrete termination point will help, in assessing the effectiveness of a Plan and in giving the participants either a sense of accomplishment or a clear clue that another conference is needed. Thus, the Target "John will be more prompt" is better stated "John will have no more than one lateness report in the next month."

The Plan involves the steps to be taken or the path to be followed to move from the Situation to the Target. In human affairs there often are many alternative ways to achieve a goal. Hence, it is important not to adopt the first approach suggested without exploring others or to become committed too soon to any one way of doing things. Initial solutions seldom are optimal, but they may stimulate the creation of better ones. The teacher should ask the parent to make the first suggestion for solution. If the parent's suggestion is selected, or if the parent is able to choose a solution he or she prefers from an array of options, the parent will have a greater investment in carrying it out successfully. The teacher should avoid responding critically to any idea until a number have been proposed. Creativity works best in an atmosphere of acceptance. Evaluation will inhibit the expression of new ideas. The wider the range of choices, the more likely the teacher is to find one that is mutually satisfying. If things bog down, the problem should be stated again. Sometimes this will start the wheels turning. Only after it is felt that a number of feasible methods are available, or one appears far superior to the others, should the teacher begin comparing and evaluating the proposed Plans. (See Activity 17.)

When reviewing Plans critically, it is important to put them to several tests: Are they likely to achieve the Target? Are they practical or can they be done within the constraints of the Situation? Are the people affected by them willing and even excited about carrying them out? The teacher should be frank and forthright

about raising whatever barriers to success come to mind. Being nice, rather than honest, at this point can lead to disappointment down the road. In evaluating the Plans already generated, one of the parties may think of a new one, better than any of the others. Or, one might hit on a modification or synthesis of ideas that improves upon what has been suggested previously.

Usually, after this examination period, one Plan emerges as clearly superior to the others. It must be clearly stated, to make certain that both parties understand what is about to be decided, and it should be verified that there is genuine mutual commitment to the Plan. Once this has been established, it is generally necessary to develop means for implementation. Discussion probably will move from general proposals to specific, detailed plans of action, asking "How should that be carried out?" and "Who needs to do what by when?" It is important for everyone to understand clearly what they have agreed to do and that they will be expected to live up to their agreements. If parents have participated in formulating the Plan, if it is a viable one, and if the Target is not grandiose or far off in time, failure is unlikely. The Plan should include frequent check points for determining how well the Plan is being carried out. (See Activity 18.)

Sometimes the issue to be resolved at the Planning phase of a conference is not discovering what to do, but deciding who is to perform a function. If this appears to be the case, it might be helpful to employ a process developed by the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service called Relationship by Objectives (RBO). This is most useful when the parent and teacher (or any other parties) disagree about what each is "supposed" to do. The first step involves having each party list, either orally or in writing, four sets of activities: (1) according to the parent, the teacher should . . . ; (2) according to the teacher, the parent should . . . ; (3) according to the parent, the parent should . . . ; (4) according to the teacher, the teacher should . . . . When articulating these, the parties should try to dephrase negative statements into positive ones ("He should stop doing . . . " becomes "He should start doing . . . ").

Next, the lists are condensed into one—the activities that both parties can agree on. Then the goals that are believed to deserve the highest priority are determined, and decisions are made concerning how they will be achieved. The participants outline, step by step, what has to be done, when each step should be accomplished, and who will be responsible for seeing it through.

Once the Situation, Target, and Plan are determined jointly, all parties are well on the way toward genuine home/school collaboration.

Activities 14, 15, 16, 17, and 18

Activity 14: Blaming Patterns. You should examine the attributions you tend to make. This might be done in three steps. First, list three problems that have occurred in your classroom (for example, "many students talk without being called upon," or "most students do not volunteer to participate in discussions"). Next, fill in "I am," then "He or she is," then "We both are," and "No one is" at the beginning of the sentence "_____ is to blame for the first (and then the second and third) problem." Finally, say each sentence and then assess which statement(s) seem(s) most likely to be true, most satisfying, most conducive to further dialogue.

Activity 15: Reframing Excuses. Parents' good-bad view of situations, and their strong desire to avoid being in the wrong, lead to their adopting a wide variety of coping strategies, or ways of "looking good" at all costs. Some that have been observed are: (1) being hostile or aggressive, placing blame—their children's problems are your fault; (2) being overwhelmed—their difficult life situation limits their own and their children's behavior; (3) denying—they don't believe that their children could be doing what you're saying about them; (4) being punitive—they are overly severe in punishing their children for any wrongdoing; (5) anxiety, timidity—they won't speak up for fear of saying the wrong thing, or they need your support to take any new step; (6) overinvolvement—they are unduly enthusiastic in supporting their children through any new step; (7) rejecting help—they avoid risking a new step by claiming beforehand that it won't work (Carberry, 1975). These are all ways of avoiding responsibility for improving a situation. These reactions also imply a judgment that makes a parent defensive rather than open and supportive. In these, too, the illusion of causality or blame must be dispelled before progress can be made.

This exercise provides practice in responding to the coping strategies discussed above. Imagine that you are conferring with the parent of a gifted female student in your class who is bored with the level of math work most people are doing. You have suggested that she do some independent work on advanced problems. After

each of the parent's responses shown below, write what you might say that would alter the framework from a right-or-wrong, cause-effect model to a win/win, mutual problem-solving approach.

"You are giving her that work to keep her out of your hair in class, instead of giving her the individual attention she needs."

"She has to help me with the other kids at home. She won't have time to do the problems."

"She can't be that good in math. I'm terrible at it and she is just like me."

"She will do those problems every night or she'll get whipped."

"Are you sure she can do them? I'm afraid she will be intimidated by moving so far ahead of the others."

"I'll help her with them. I'll show her how they are done."

"Those problems won't interest her. I know she will still be bored."

Activity 16: Analyzing Situations. Another way of looking at the Situation in a systematic way is provided by Mager and Pipe (1970). They propose a sequence of prototype questions to be used in analyzing a situation (each will suggest a Plan, as well). These apply whenever a discrepancy is noted between a student's actual behavior and what is desirable.

Does the student have the ability to behave as desired?

If the answer is "no," ask: Has the student ever performed the behavior? (If not, he or she needs special training.)	If the answer is "yes," ask: Is performance of that behavior rewarded? (If not, provide positive consequences for doing it.)
If the answer is "no," ask: Has the student performed this behavior recently? (If not, he or she needs practice.) Does the student behave incorrectly? (If so, provide constructive feedback.)	If the answer is "yes," ask: Does performance of that behavior bring negative consequences or is non-performance rewarded? (If so, improve or alter the consequences that follow performance of the behavior.)

Imagine that you are interviewing the parent of a student who is turning in very poor book reports. The reports usually are short and contain several writing errors. Write out in your own words

the questions you might ask that parent to determine which of the following explanations for that student's behavior apply.

He or she has difficulty in comprehending the assigned reading material.

He or she has little or no experience in writing book reports.

He or she is not aware of how inadequate the book reports have been.

He or she has been given good grades for this quality work in the past.

He or she gets to go out and play as soon as homework is done.

His or her friends are poor students and would be scornful if he or she did well.

He or she thinks book reports are not important in determining grades, or the student thinks no one cares about what the student's grades are.

Activity 17: Eliciting Information. The Situation, Target, and Plan are interdependent. A comment about one suggests information about the other two. It can be unnatural to work on only one at a time and to insist that the S-T-P sequence be followed mechanically. Instead, as ideas are presented they should be jotted down and filed mentally under one of these three headings and then used to generate a question that will yield information about the other aspects of the problem. For example, you can elicit Situation information from a Target statement ("In what ways does the present situation fall short of that goal?" "What forces for improvement are there for reaching that goal?" "What obstacles stand in the way of reaching that goal?") or from a Plan statement ("What might that action take into account or improve in the current situation?" "What resources are there for doing that?"). You can elicit Target information from a Situation statement ("If you could change the present situation, what would you want to accomplish?") or from a Plan statement ("What goal does that proposal aim at?" "To accomplish what?"). Finally, you can elicit Plan information from a Situation statement ("What might be done to improve that?" "What kind of action does that seem to require?") or from a Target statement ("What steps might lead toward that goal?").

To practice focus-shifting, first identify the parents' statements below as related to Situation, Target, or Plan (circle S, T, or P)

and then use the statement as the basis for writing a question (as described above) that will elicit information about one of the other two elements in the problem-solving process.

S T P 1. "Sally is being picked on by children in the schoolyard."

S T P 2. "Bill needs to develop his ability to work quietly over longer periods of time."

S T P 3. "Tim should be put in charge of the class library."

S T P 4. "Jane is very bright and feels bored in your class."

S T P 5. "John is going to be grounded this weekend."

S T P 6. "I want Jack to enjoy his schoolwork."

Answers: 1, S; 2, T; 3, P; 4, S; 5, P; 6, T.

Activity 18: Assigning Responsibilities. Sometimes the issue to be resolved at the planning phase of a conference is not discovering what to do but deciding who is to perform a function. If this appears to be the case, it might be helpful to employ a process developed by the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service called Relationship by Objectives (RBO). This is most useful when the parent and teacher (or any other parties) disagree as to what each is "supposed" to do.

The first step involves having each person list (either orally or in writing) four different sets of acitivities: (1) according to the parent, the teacher should . . . ; (2) according to the teacher, the parent should . . . ; (3) according to the parent, the parent should . . . ; (4) according to the teacher, the teacher should . . . . When articulating these, try to dephrase negative statements into positive ones (for example, "He should stop doing . . . " becomes "He should start doing . . . ").

Next, working together, condense the lists into one—the activities you both can agree on. Pick the goals you believe deserve the highest priority and decide how they will be achieved. Outline, step by step, what has to be done, when each step should be accomplished, and who will be responsible for seeing it through.

To experience how this method might be applied in a specific situation, recall any instance in which you and someone else (preferably a parent, but it could be a student, an administrator, a friend, your spouse or child) disagreed about the assignment of

tasks—that is, one of you felt "taken advantage of," overburdened, or imposed upon. Then carry out the RBO process as described, by filling in what you and the other person thought each should do at the time and then what plan you subsequently worked out together. (If a satisfying agreement was never reached, this exercise might suggest to you how to deal with similar problems in the future.)

6 Conference Effects

Although parents, students, and teachers may approach conferences with the best of intentions and with high hopes for positive outcomes, the results are not always in the direction of improvement. The very caring and concern that make a conference a crucial event in their lives can breed destructive consequences. Such high investment can bring elation or despair, depending on what occurs. When any participant feels hurt, diminished, or angry after a conference, or when one regrets having participated in it, we may view that individual as a casualty.

Avoiding Casualties

One psychiatrist (Green, 1974) reports seeing parents who have been pushed beyond a stress line as a result of a school conference. Many parents live with doubts about the adequacy of their child-rearing abilities. This often is true of the single parent who is carrying an excessive burden of responsibilities, or of the out-of-work parent who can't provide accustomed material benefits for his or her child. Already hurt and low in self-esteem, their child can be those parents' "Achilles heel," so that a teacher's critique can leave them deeply upset. A student can become a casualty if parents have unrealistic, idealized expectations for her or him; if the teacher's negative evaluation triggers frustration of these hopes and anger, rejection or even physical abuse of the child can result. Even the teacher can be a casualty when parents become defensive and team up with their child or other parents to direct unjust criticism toward the teacher. In any case, the remainder of the school year can be undermined by the after-effects of an ineffectively conducted conference.

Interactions leading to casualties can occur in many forms, some obvious and some quite subtle. Pressured by an accumulation of dissatisfactions with a student's behavior and inadequate conference time, the teacher can become unduly upset and overemphasize the negative aspects of that student's performance.

Stored-up anger at a student is common and needs to be acknowledged by the teacher, rather than repressed. Usually, however, it should not be ventilated first at a parent conference. Instead, it is best talked out with a colleague or an intimate, who has less at stake with that student and can hear the teacher's frustration compassionately. Afterwards the teacher is more capable of mapping out a workable strategy for approaching the parent.

Even when the teacher's initiative is primarily positive, during a parent conference a spiral effect can take place in which even a slight negative comment is blown out of proportion. This occurs because underlying feelings of liking and disliking usually arouse parallel emotions in the other. If an individual likes someone and shows it, their liking for the individual, in return, will usually increase. The same applies to disliking. Thus, if the parent or the teacher starts from a hostile orientation (or even if one is aroused on the spot) it is most likely to evoke a hostile reaction from the other. Even if only one party is particularly sensitive at the time, this exchange can continue and escalate rapidly in a heightening spiral of ever greater intensity.

Another dangerous pattern concerns support and dependence. When factors of dominance, power, or control are at issue, one position is more likely to produce its opposite in the exchange. Thus, if one person feels weak or helpless, the other is likely to react from a position of strength or support. For example, a parent in need elicits a nurturing response from the teacher. This complementarity is fine, except that it, too, can escalate to a point where the teacher's sympathy shifts to resentment at the parent's dependency.

To prevent such potentially damaging patterns from occurring, teachers need to be sensitive to the feelings developing within themselves and in the dialogue with parents. When a sense of exasperation seems to arise in one's self or in the other's voice, face, or words, a shift in the conversation needs to take place. The pattern itself can be pointed out, but without judgment or blame. Then they can work together to change it (for example, "We seem to be arguing over who is at fault, rather than considering what we can do about the problem."). If this seems appropriate, the teacher can assertively change his or her role in the exchange and thus diminish the intensity of the spiraling movement towards communication breakdown ("I'm afraid that I won't be able to provide special help for Tom any longer."). A return to clarifying and reaffirming the shared basic goals of the

conference can help to reemphasize the initial purpose from which the participants are drifting ("We both want Tom to do better, let's not lose sight of that."). If teachers are tuned in to the "climate" or "vibrations" in the conference and adapt to them skillfully, casualties are unlikely to occur.

Following Up Agreements

A conference is a potent intervention, often intended to alter ongoing patterns in the participants' behavior. It is likely to produce some immediate results. However, as time goes on, often the memory of the conference dims, the circumstances from which the undesirable behavior emerged regain their effect, and the changes fade away. This relapse can be disheartening to all involved. Consequently, procedures should be employed that will help to maintain the gains achieved at the conference.

Planning for future impact can occur at the conference itself. Developing a contingency contract is one way to do this. The essential steps in this procedure are agreeing upon a behavior change by one party (usually the student) and then identifying what the others' response (usually the parent's and teacher's) will be if that behavior is done as agreed and what their response will be if it is not.

In one instance (Brooks, 1974), when a high school student was excessively truant, a contingency contract was made that included the following elements:

> Student's behavior—attending every class as scheduled, having the teacher initial the student's attendance card at the end of each class period, turning in the attendance card at the end of each school day, recording on a chart in the counseling office the number of classes attended, and attending a group rap session once a week.
>
> Reward schedule—if the above behaviors are completed as agreed, the first week the parent removes restrictions for four hours on Friday night, the second week restrictions are removed from six hours on Saturday, and the third week all Friday and Saturday restrictions are removed. After three weeks another brief conference is held to develop a new reward schedule if needed.
>
> Agreement statements—all of the parties sign their names below statements such as: parent, "I agree to follow the con-

tract and dispense the rewards according to the provisions stated above"; student, "I agree to carry out the behaviors stated in this contract"; teacher (or counselor), "I agree to monitor this contract and to make a written (or verbal) progress report to (student's name) and the student's mother at the end of each week."

The contingency contract procedure serves to specify and clearly record the agreements made at the conference; it extends the impact of the conference into the future with a minimum cost of time for busy school personnel; it gives students and parents a concrete role in the achievement of educational objectives; and it focuses the students' attention on the reward (vs. the demands) of school attendance. Some may argue that the last is a form of bribery, but bribery is defined as "paying for the commission of an act that is illegal or immoral." Going to school falls into neither of these categories.

There are other ways of following up conference agreements. One is, recording the essence of the conference discussion and placing that summary in the student's cumulative record folder for future reference. This record includes the parties involved, the issues addressed, and the decisions made. If the conference was between only the parent and teacher, time should be taken the next day to go over with each student what was discussed and decided—even if the conference involved only getting acquainted and exchanging some basic information. Students usually are concerned about what the most significant adults in their lives have said about them, and the parents' version should not be the only one they receive.

Finally, even if an explicit contract has not been developed, it can be useful to send home a note to all parents to obtain feedback on issues such as: "At our recent conference, the following agreements were made . . . . Would you please let me know how you are doing? Are they being kept consistently? Sometimes? Not at all? Would you like to continue these agreements? Change them? Do you feel another conference, either in person or by phone, is needed? Is there any other comment you would like to make about our conference or what has happened since?" (Freeman, 1975). Such efforts at continuing communication between the school and the home can greatly aid in prolonging the beneficial results of the partnership developed at the face-to-face conference. (See Activity 19.)

Parent Group Meetings

When conferences are scheduled for all parents of a class there is much redundancy among them. Much of what needs to be communicated is the same for every family. Further, there are experiences and insights that parents can share profitably among themselves. For these reasons, many teachers schedule group meetings to which all of their students' parents are invited. These often are scheduled at the beginning of the school year when the enthusiasm of parents and teachers is at a high point. They can serve to orient the parents to the curriculum and methods to be used for the year ahead. Such a meeting helps to launch the school/home interaction on a positive, well-informed basis. It is a good time to gain parent volunteer help, answer their questions, and facilitate their contact for car pools or after-school activities.

Another purpose for a group meeting is to provide an opportunity for parent education. Dinkmeyer (1973) advocates that groups of five to eight parents be brought together to discuss child-rearing practices. He suggests an hour and a half each week over a six- to eight-week span. After introductions, a parent begins by raising a concern that might apply to all present. This is explored through a specific behavioral incident, in which the child's actions and the parent's response, both overt and internal (feelings and interpretations), are described. The teacher and the other parents help this parent by considering alternative views of the event and ways of responding to it, and by sharing comparable experiences in their own home situations. This interaction encourages parents to examine beliefs and attitudes that lead to power struggles with children ("I must be in control." "Disobedience is a personal challenge and must be met by force."), to recognize that they can only change a child's behavior if they are willing first to change their own, and to identify the specific alternatives to what they have been doing that fit best with their own personalities and circumstances. The teacher avoids the role of expert and encourages the contributions of members by asking "What do you think about that?" The teacher moderates the discussion so that everyone has a chance to participate, so that parents respect and empathize with each other, and so that parents come to see common ground among themselves and grow in optimism and confidence (that is, their problems are "normal," not unique, and resolvable, not hopeless). The meeting usually is closed by the teacher, who asks parents to clarify the specific commitments they have made to

change an attitude, belief, or procedure in dealing with their children (and by doing the same in return). Subsequent meetings are begun by asking, "How did things go with your new procedure last week?"

Another approach is to bring parents together in the classroom one evening at Open School Week time. Students can tape a name-tag on their desk tops and provide a folder there, enclosing the work they have done up to that point for their parents to examine. One teacher begins by introducing himself and sharing his feelings when visiting his own child's teacher. He explains his values and goals in teaching and then invites parents to introduce themselves by sharing their own and their child's names, plus a minor fact about each one's child such as his or her favorite food. Then the teacher talks about the curriculum, the instructional methods used, and the role he hopes parents will play in the educational process. A question-and-answer session follows. Finally, the teacher draw parents into deeper involvement by soliciting volunteers for various helping roles in the class and school, by discussing how they can help most effectively at home, and by inviting them to browse the room and building, to set up individual conferences, and even to try using some of the innovative materials currently employed in classroom instruction (Bellanca, 1978).

The group methods proposed here are reported to be extremely useful when implemented appropriately. When parent-teacher interaction is expanded beyond the dyad--to triadic, small group, or large group contacts—the process grows in complexity and becomes more difficult to handle. Hence, preparation and training for these modes should be especially thorough. Further reading and attendance at workshops dealing with the skills required are strongly recommended for teachers interested in utilizing these methods (Friedman, 1978). (See Activity 20.)

Activities 19 and 20

Activity 19: Following Up. To prepare for interaction with parents after a conference with them, draft generally applicable notes to send home at these two occasions: (1) immediately after the conference, and (2) about six weeks later, to check on implementation of agreements. Your letters should affirm past cooperation from parents, refer to the concrete agreements made at the conference, and suggest the next step your collaboration might take.

Activity 20: Your Own Growth. The process of growing toward

enhanced professional competence is never-ending. This book is intended to provide a step in this direction. Conferences are vital, challenging, interactions. It is hoped that you now are more knowledgeable, skillful, and confident in approaching them. Now that this step is achieved, it may be timely to consider what ways of growth lie ahead. To do so, plan three things you will do from this point on (for example, read a specific piece from the bibliography, pay particular attention to and practice one skill mentioned herein, ask someone for feedback about how you come across in problem-solving discussions, go back and complete earlier exercises in the book, or close the book, relax, and watch daydreams of harmonious communication in conferences flit across your mind). Whatever you decide, best wishes for a future of conferences that work for you.

Epilogue

When we consider heated arguments about child-rearing that occur among experts in that field, among people of different ages and ethnic backgrounds, and even between parents in a home, it is to be expected that misunderstandings and disagreements will arise in parent-teacher interaction as well. This book is intended to provide teachers with principles and practices for recognizing, acknowledging, and exploring those inevitable sore points, for strengthening linkages with the parents with whom they must collaborate, and for finding and implementing solutions whenever breakdowns occur in that process. Perhaps ivory-tower experts can argue dogmatically for their points of view. But practicing educators, who must confer with a heterogeneous mixture of parents—who increasingly view themselves as teacher's partners or even superiors in directing their children's education—must employ the skills of interpersonal communication discussed here, if they are to be effective. Learning to apply these skills, in a sensitive, timely, constructive way, is a never-ending, never-dull endeavor.

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